

Isaac's chili has withstood the test of time

When you talk to longtime Green Bay residents about their favorite restaurants unique to Green Bay, the name of Chili John's, the oldest still in operation, is sure to come up.

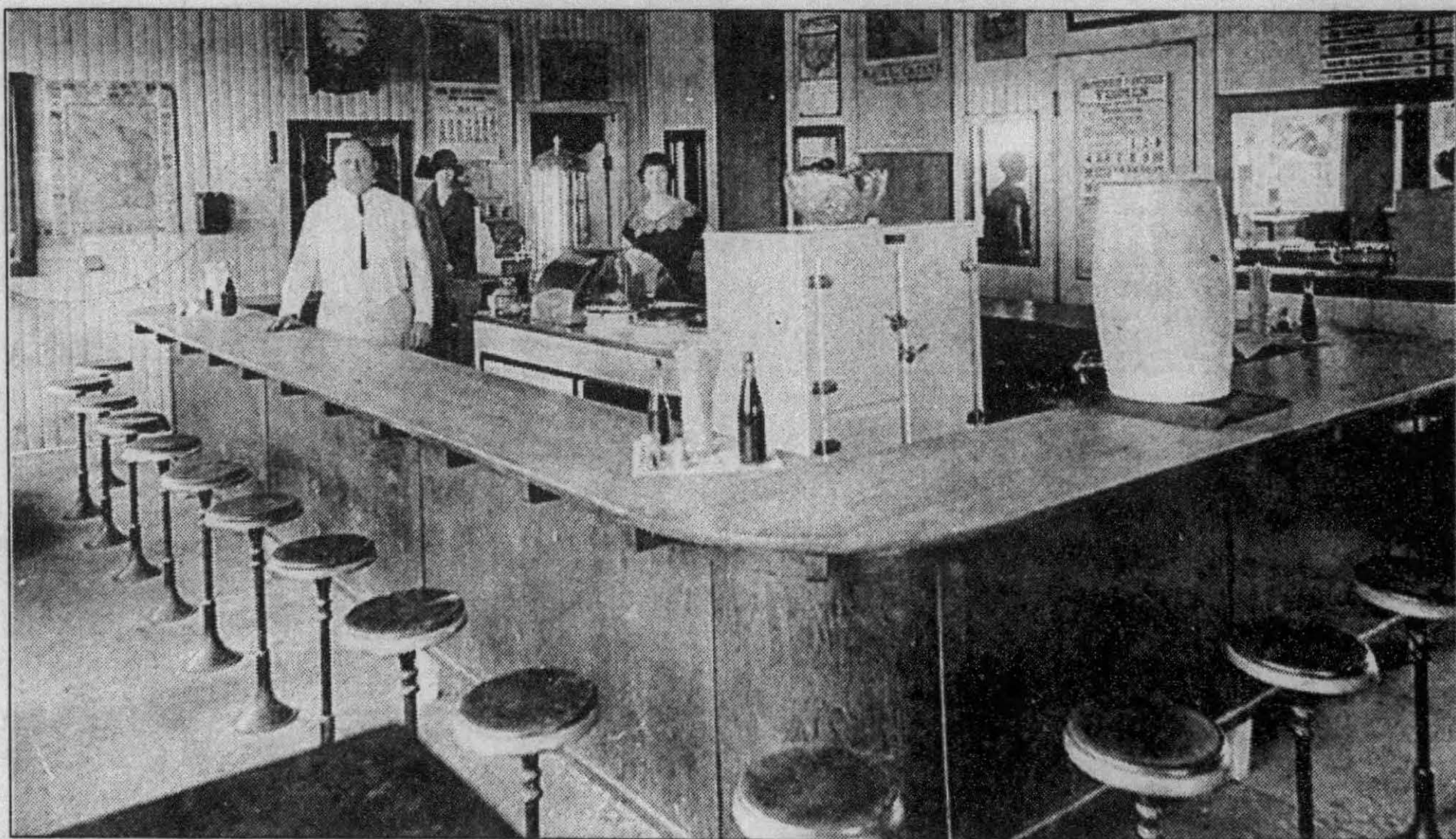
You can buy Chili John's famous meat sauce in many local grocery stores, and you can dine at Chili John's Restaurant on Military Avenue, an establishment that traces its roots back to 1913.

It was John Isaac who created the secret formula for the hot meat sauce. Born in Lithuania in 1875, Isaac immigrated to the U.S. with his family. His father found work in Pennsylvania and Illinois coal mines before clearing a 160-acre homestead near Krakow, Wis. Eventually, Isaac and his wife, Mary Jones, owned a tavern in Auburn, Ill., where Isaac began serving a peppery hot chili. For seven years, Isaac worked to perfect the fiery meat sauce, whose authentic recipe is still a secret.

When Illinois cracked down on bars and taverns, Isaac closed the saloon. He borrowed \$15 and decided to move to Green Bay. He was able to locate his new establishment at the foot of the Main Street Bridge. With a sign that bore only the word "Chili," Isaac's establishment attracted travelers from the nearby Beaumont Hotel (now the Day's Inn) and the railroad depot (Titledown Brewery, today).

Patrons would say, "Chili, John," tradition has it, and over time the name of the restaurant and proprietor were changed to the name we know today.

Originally, Chili John made about 500 pounds of his sauce every two weeks at the family home, delivering enough to handle each day's business at the restaurant. Today, your bowl of beans, spaghetti and meat sauce made from beef, suet, secret spices, garlic and salt is made daily. In the old days, "rush hour" occurred three times a day — lunch, supper, and following a late



Kewaunee County Historical Society photo

Ready to serve: John Isaac, founder of Chili John's, stands behind the counter of his Green Bay chili parlor in 1924.

movie or bowling. Chili John even shipped his product out of Green Bay upon special request.

The chili parlor made several moves over the years, all within downtown, until the Military Avenue branch was opened in 1973 and the downtown location closed soon after. Chili John Isaac died in 1946, but over the years, his wife, daughters and grandson have operated the company, which now also boasts a large production facility to supply restaurants in the area.

*Article submitted by Nan Nelson,
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Throughout this year of Wisconsin's Sesquicentennial celebration, the Press-Gazette will publish a series of stories on local history. This feature, prepared with the assistance of the Brown County Historical Society, will appear on Mondays.

